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WASHINGTON

A State Department official said Wednesday that it is "very likely" that

the Soviet Union is using prisoners as forced labor to build parts of its pipeline to Western Europe.

Richard Burt, director of the department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, said the department has made an "initial investigation" of reports in the European press to this effect.

Testifying at a Senate hearing on his nomination as assistant secretary of state for European affairs, Burt said there are an estimated 2 million "common prisoners" in the Soviet Union.

"Very often those prisoners are used for large industrial projects, and we think it is very likely that forced labor is being used to conduct portions of the pipeline," he said.

Burt said he had not seen "concrete or definite evidence" and the department was continuing to gather information.

"One report suggests that people in Soviet prison camps are being allowed to leave early, they are paid wages as common workers and they are used to work on large industrial projects including the pipeline," he said.

On another issue, he said the Soviet Union "may have cut back on its use of toxic and chemical weapons in Southeast Asia."

At an earlier hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee on arms control, Burt testified that such weapons, known as "yellow rain," were being used by the Soviets in Afghanistan and parts of Cambodia.

At Wednesday's hearing before the full Foreign Relations Committee, he said there was no doubt in his mind that the Soviets were continuing to use the weapons, which are outlawed by a 1972 international agreement.

He said the apparent decline in their use may have resulted from the department's decision to make public evidence that it says shows the Soviets have used such weapons.

"If the campaign has had this effect, we are very satisfied," he said.

In response to another question, Burt said the department has undertaken a preliminary investigation of reports that the Soviet Union may have been involved in the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II last year. He said the department "has been in touch with the governments concerned, including the